

ISLAM
&
THE FUTURE
of
THE WORLD

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Introduction

Any objective study of the history of mankind will show that man cannot but pose the questions: Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where do I go from here? These unavoidable questions make a philosopher of each of us, whether we know it or not.

The search for answers to these fundamental issues has produced many different myths, foundational legends, and other visions. In the end, these visions — attempts at interpreting the world — developed into religions proper. The oldest surviving ones we know as Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, not to forget different forms of Shamanism.¹

Polytheism arose when people associated supernatural forces with individual aspects of nature — thunder and lightning, sun and fire, fertility and death. In a way, such polytheism is peaceful because it has no universalist aspirations; everybody is content with his particular family of divinities.

Nevertheless, in polytheism there is a built-in trend towards monotheism. When one tribe conquers his neighbouring tribe, the victor imports his deity and relegates the local deities to a lower rank. We had such a situation in pre-Islamic Arabia where secondary goddesses al-Lat, Manat and Uzza were worshipped in addition to *al-ilah*, the supreme deity whom the Muslims address as Allah ta'ala.

Religious history entered a new stage when monotheism appeared, first — for a very short period in Egypt during the reign of Echna-tun — and later with the Banu

¹ Shamanism: The religion of N. Asia, based essentially on magic and sorcery.

Israil. The Jewish idea that there is only one God Who is their tribal God, is of course a contradiction in itself. If there is one single God, it must be everybody's, not of a particular Chosen People. It was therefore only logical that Jesus, and after him St. Paul, insisted on the universality of the belief in Jahwe¹, the One and Only God.

At that moment, with the advent of religious universalism, mankind entered one of the bloodiest phases of its history. The Christians thought in terms of One God and One Church, outside of which there is no salvation. To this dogma called in Latin *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* the Catholic Church hung on for 1900 years, until the 2nd Vatican Council in 1965/66. On the basis of this dogma, Christianity — supposedly a religion of love — became aggressively virulent. It engaged in the physical suppression and elimination of any other denomination or religion, be they Christian in outlook, Jewish, or Muslim. Thus Germanic tribes were massacred for Christ; Muslims were slaughtered in al-Quds during the Crusades; witches and so-called heretics were burned; Orthodox Eastern Christians were outlawed; and all the Muslims and Jews in Spain expelled.

It is obvious that during this painful phase, lasting beyond the 17th century, the Christian religion was first used as an i d e o l o g y, i.e. as a political instrument for the legitimation and motivation of power projection. To some extent the same thing happened to Islam. It, too, became a power-conscious empire, expanding in all directions from al-Madina to Damascus, Baghdad, Marrakesh and Istanbul. True, there was a religious basis for these wars which led Muslims all the way to Southern France and the suburbs of Vienna. Therefore, for that period only, it is not entirely wrong to project onto Islam the Christian notion of holy war (*sacrum*

¹. The name of God in the Old Testament

bellum) for what we call lesser *jihad* (*al-jihad as-saghir*). Whether we like it or not, Islam, too, was used as an ideology, an instrument for power projection.

But only from the 18th century onwards, following the proclamation of the Age of Reason and the Project Modernity, do we enter the real ideological era. To the extent that religion disappeared from public consciousness and view after the Enlightenment, ideologies functionally replaced them. Secular ideologies divorced from religion, now became pseudo-religions. This was as well true of 19th century romanticism as it was of positivism, also called scienticism. Nevertheless, Marxism — as developed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin — may be considered as the first modern ideology, as its very prototype.

Marxism posed as a complete world view, a monastic, materialist “Weltanschauung” which through its Dialectical Materialism (Diamat) explained the functioning of nature and through its Historical Materialism (Histomat) explained the functioning of society. Marxism, like a religion, tried to engage and control its adherents totally, with a moral commitment worthy of any cause. Clearly, there were many religious overtones within an otherwise atheistic environment. *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital* became holy scriptures: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin turned into Apostles of the socialist faith. The Communist Party acted like an infallible church, and Politbureau members as its priests. Heaven was replaced by the wonderful vision of a classless future where everyone will receive according to his requirements and work will turn into fun.

The different branches of Fascism, in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Greece simply repackaged this socialist vision with a strong dosis¹ of racist chauvinism — justifying

1. Greek word meaning dose

and motivating the most atrocious crimes against hated outsiders, be they Jews, Gypsies, or Eastern European Slavs. Again, religion was ever present. *Mein Kampf* became holy scripture in Germany and Adolf Hitler a saviour who would lead the country into a prosperous future: an empire lasting 1000 years. Again it was the Nazi Party which, like a church, determined what was right and what was wrong, and SS-troupers were organised like religious orders.

In reaction to Marxism and Fascism counter-ideologies grew up strongly. I am referring here to Western liberalism, incorporating capitalism, and French type laicism — the complete elimination of religion from public life. In the post-colonialist Arab world every one of the Western ideologies mentioned was tried: nationalism, liberalism, fascism, socialism — and all failed miserably.

In view of all this, the 20th century can be called the ideological century.

Typical Feature of 19th/20th Century Ideologies

We should now focus on one common element typical for all 19th and 20th century ideologies: They were all materialistic, secular in outlook, without any transcendental vision. Therefore, none of them could answer the basic human questions of wherefrom? why? and whereto?

During and shortly after the Enlightenment thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Auguste Comte, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that man, liberated from religion, could master his world with his rational faculties alone. Rationalism would guarantee in the end a prosperous, peaceful, humanitarian world.

We know better now, and are not surprised. We know that the Project Modernity failed miserably in its endeavour

1. One where language is slavonic, i.e. belongs to that division of the Indo-Germanic tongues that includes Russian, Polish, Wendish, Czech, slovak, Serbian, Sloverican and Bulgarian.

to tame destructive human instincts by reason alone. Instead of post-religious paradise on earth we had the most incredibly savage World Wars, chemical and nuclear warfare, the holocaust, and ethnic "cleansing" — to name only a few disasters.

We are not surprised because it is obvious that only religion can motivate people to such an extent that they can overcome their base instincts, their sexual passion, their monumental egotism. When man became the measure of all thing, dethroning God, all laws were at man's disposal. In the process, all the very idea of divine law was discarded, but all efforts finding a binding "natural law" failed.

Shrewd Western observers already a generation ago came to the bitter conclusion that mankind will destroy itself, and the globe with it, unless it rediscovers religion. Daniel Bell, Harvard professor of Sociology, already in 1976 discovered that capitalism in the long run is self-destructive because its very economic success poisons the virtues on which the economy is built. In his book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* Bell therefore pleaded for the readoption of some sort of religion, even if one had to invent a new one for the purpose of re-establishing morality.

Equally perceptive was another devastating critique of Western civilization, written by the American ex-diplomat William Ophuls. In his *Requiem for Modern Politics — The Tragedy of the Enlightenment and the Challenges of the New Millennium* in 1997 he predicted that the Occident will collapse, like Communism before it, as a result of its lack of a compelling vision.

Both observers rediscovered what is a banality: That no human civilization ever survived without spirituality.

Against this background it is of the highest significance that Islam made an unexpected, spectacular

comeback as from the 70s of the 20th century. What could one expect from a religion which had slumbered in a state of stagnation for the last 400 years, personalities like al-Sarhindi, Shah Waliullah and Muhammad Ibn al-Wahhab notwithstanding? What could one expect from a religion virtually all of whose adherents had been colonised by European powers? Western orientalist could not be blamed when they studied Islam just as biologists do when studying a disappearing species threatened to become defunct. Islam was of merely historical interest for them. Max Henning, when issuing his translation of the Qur'an into German wrote as late as 1901 that "Islam has obviously played out its political role".

This was everybody's view. Nobody considered Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh as harbingers of a new Islamic spring. Nobody foresaw the impact people like Muhammad Iqbal, Hassan al-Banna, Sayid Qutb, or Abul-Ala al-Maududi and Muhammad Asad might have for a world-wide Islamic *sahwa* and *nahda* (awakening).

But today, unbelievably, there is not a single country on this globe in which one does not find active Muslims, from Korea to Columbia, from Iceland to New Zealand. Muslims — only 1/7th of mankind 100 years ago — now make up 1/5th of the world population. There are now representative mosques in places like London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Lisbon, Zagreb, New York and Los Angeles. More importantly: Thanks to labour migration and the attraction of Western universities, there are now many millions of Muslims active in Europe and in the United States; everywhere Islam is becoming the second biggest religious community. You cannot open a newspaper or turn on a TV-programme today without running into Islamic issues. Now, and now only, the wealth of classical Islamic literature is available in all major European languages. The Qur'an has

become the most frequently translated and most often recited book on earth.

Since all this happened during the ideological 20th century, since some Islamic movements are primarily pursuing political aims, and since some Muslims out of sheer desperation are driven to use violence — for all these reasons Islam, too, is often now referred to as an ideology. This is true inasmuch as Islam offers a set of ideas also for running affairs in *ad-dunya*. But we should avoid referring to our faith as an ideology because that term now smacks of politics and this-worldliness.

To Whom Belongs The Future?

Be that as it may, what counts is the fact that at the beginning of the 3rd millennium there are only two worldviews left which compete for the hearts and minds of Western man: post-modern Secularism and Islam. That is the alternative, and there are no other option in sight, even though Buddhism attracts a few occidental intellectuals here and there who would like to have another chance in another life.

Thus we have arrived at the one-hundred thousand dollar question: To whom belongs the future?

The outcome will be determined by the answer given to another question: Will the 21st century become a religious one or not?

Currently, it looks as if religions were on their way out, more so in Europe, though, than in the United States. People are leaving the Christian churches in droves. And these churches even help speed up their demise by entering one compromise after the other with the spirit and fashions of our time. Thus you have homosexual priests, abortion of children as and when you like, female bishops and virtually no period of fasting any longer. Believe me, the churches

are selling out that way. No wonder that a near-majority of the faithful (and even some Protestant clergy) no longer believe in the divinity of Jesus or life after death.

However, this is not the entire picture because there is still much vagabonding and privatised religion around. Religion is seeking new niches for its existence away from the established churches. Go into any occidental bookshop and you will see that the Esoterics section is by far larger than the one of Religion. People still want to know their future, be introduced to all secrets, and become happy. These basically religious desires have made whole industries boom. People experiment with anything: Shamanism, Celtic Priestesses, Satanic Cults, drug induced ego-trips, Indian gurus, fantastic diets and health fads, and even ecstatic Tango dancing.

My diagnosis is that these people, mostly from younger generations, are seekers of religion in transit. They are sick of the meaninglessness, the spiritual vacuum in their lives, and looking for certainty in a world in which "anything goes". They have been raised without restrictions and are craving for leadership, real values, and reliable norms. In short: These people represent an enormous religious potential. They may turn the 21st century into a religious one.

The question therefore is: Will Islam be perceived as a better choice than Christianity before? And will worshipping together be preferred to the private type of religion now so prevalent? As for the first question, it is my considered opinion that Christianity in Europe is beyond repair. I am equally convinced that the Occident cannot get its act together through an artificial new religion, an eclectic Esperanto¹ religion. It won't work because religion presupposes authority beyond doubt. Only a religion built on revelation can qualify.

As for the latter question, I am rather positive because

the young generation is again cherishing togetherness and getting increasingly worried about the fate of “singles” as they grow older. It is indeed one of the major assets of the young that Islam comes together with a family, the *ummah*, and that brotherhood and sisterhood in the Islamic community is more real, more touchable, than the idea of loving-thy-neighbour is among Christians. If the emotional cooling of Western societies (not the promised Greening of America)¹ is a fact, as I think it is, then the Islamic *ummah* in offering warmth and compassion fulfils a basic need of contemporary Western kids.

The autistic nature of cyberspace, the sexually overheated atmosphere in which Westerners live, and the brutal competitiveness of life in the West from school to job, from job to sexual relations with the constant pressure to over-achieve have led to a situation where the average American is consulting at least one psychiatrist, their so-called “shrink”. Such people cannot fail to be impressed by the obvious fact that most Muslims are self-content, unstressed, not under undue time pressure, in short in harmony with God, themselves and their environment. For all these reasons I feel that many people, tired of their daily rat race routine, will be eager to discover more about Islam.

The Role of Muslims

Whether people will in fact discover this religion, depends a lot on how the Muslims present their Islam, or misrepresent it. True, it is Allah ta’ala Who guides those on the right path whom He wills. And many a convert — like Jeffrey Lang in San Francisco² — has been sucked into the fold without any previous contact with Muslims, exclusively

1. I am referring here to the title of Charles Reich’s best-seller published in New York in 1970

2. An artificial language, based on the most common words in the European languages, which failed miserably

by reading the Qur'an. But on the whole it is Muslims whom Allah uses as His *Dawah* instruments.

Let me first address what the Muslims should do in order to propagate Islam. This recommendation can be summed up in one sentence: Present Islam as a major *contribution* to the healing of Western society and civilization, as a precious medication for the most crucial woes which are about to destroy the Occident. I am calling for assertiveness and pro-active measures, not for an apologetic posture and defensive reactions. Not to appear as someone who is asking for something but as someone who has to offer something.

And to offer we have a lot beyond what I mentioned already:

a) The Muslim concept of God — the incomparable One and Unique Divinity, both immanent and transcendent, beyond time and space, the only being that has real Being — is the only concept which will satisfy the educated modern man. *Tawhid*, pristine monotheism without any frills, is our major asset!

b) No civilization can survive for long the breakdown of family structures as we observe it currently. The family is virtually under assault, even by the State that does everything to promote extra-marital relationships. The divorce rates are appallingly high. Half of households in major towns are now run by "singles", including women who want a child but no husband. A large sector of children is growing up without a father. How unbalanced many kids are shows in their growing propensity to violence. Their respect for elders and the family is so low that now it is even possible in America for children to sue for divorce from their unloved parents.

It is obvious that Muslim families are also under strain, given the impact of globalisation, economic pressures and the influence of television. Still, however, Muslim families

in general are much more tightly knit and provide much more security than the average Western one. This asset Muslims must bring to bear.

c) The second existential danger to Western society is posed by the spread of all sorts of addictions — to cigarettes, alcohol, cocaine, LSD and other drugs, but also to TV and the internet. One can say without overstating the case that the West is structurally addicted. It is so sad to see people who cannot cope with life without that glass, that pill or that cigarette. Such people are in fact practising a modern form a *shirk*. They are slaves to something else but God — and that would become even more glaringly clear if they attempted to abide by the rules of Ramadhan: they can't because they are no longer their own boss.

Muslims can be proud in demonstrating that they are structurally sober: always ready, always alert, never with a mind or their language blurred, never guilty of fatal car accidents under the influence. Hardly anything shows more clearly that Islam is an alternative way of life, capable of saving the West from self-destruction in delirium.

d) Western societies are all threatened from within by various forms of ethnic prejudice, racism, chauvinism, and the discrimination of other religions. Their slave history is still visible in the United States. All the many wars fought until recently in Europe and in America were due to such prejudices.

Against this background it must seem like heaven to responsible Westerners when they realise that Islam, at least in theory and mostly also in practice, is the one religion which has solved the problems of race and religious pluralism: by making piety, and not colour, important; by accepting anybody in the same *ummah*; and by tolerating other religions whole-heartedly.

When Malcolm X discovered the multi-racial nature

of the ummah, that was for him a revelation.

Let us make the best of this virtue by living it, by making colour, caste, language and similar distinctions irrelevant among us. Millions of Afro-Americans have chosen Islam last not least because Bilal was black. Why should not millions follow for similar considerations?

Equally impressive is of course the manifesto of religious pluralism contained in al-Ma'ida: 48 (*To you we sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety.*) and al-Baqara: 256 (*Let there be no compulsion in religion*). This foundational tolerance — commanded and practised 1400 years before the modern World Ecumenical Movement — is so extraordinary in the eyes of Western people that they cannot but applaud. All we need to do is to point out that Greece remained Orthodox during 500 years of Turkish rule — and then ask where the Muslims are in Spain, where they lived for 800 years before being expelled.

e) Young people feel emancipated, and want to remain so. They hate hierarchies, sacraments administered by clergymen, mysterious dogmas, and anything that reminds them of church institutions.

Such people are pleasantly surprised when they find out that Islam knows no church, no Pope, no sacraments, and no mind-boggling dogmas like divine incarnation, trinity, salvation on the cross, or hereditary sin. They are thrilled to learn that there are no more emancipated believers than Muslims since they do not tolerate any intercession, be it by priests or saints, when they face Allah, fully individually, in their prayer. They are likely to be as impressed when learning that each and every Muslim, regardless of rank, is qualified ad hoc to serve as imam.

f) You may be surprised to hear that Muslim discipline

in matters of sex strikes a positive note with many young people nowadays who lean towards modern "value conservatism". Many a Western woman who feels hunted down by men in the street as a mere sex object admires Muslimat whose dress and composure send the clear signal that they are not cheap game. Given the ongoing exploitation of women in pornography, fashion shows, beauty contests, and sexually explicit commercials, many Western women, partisans of women's emancipation, now understand that their Muslim sisters pursue the same aim — female dignity — but do so more successfully.

In this context, the strict Muslim position on abortion — ruling it out except if the mother's life is in clear and present danger — commands more and more respect in "pro life" Western circles who deplore that even Catholic bishops nowadays permit abortion for all kinds of reasons. Islam is seen as taking a clear-cut pro life position in favour of the child.

The Muslim position on homosexuality also commands respect with the silent majority in the West who condemns the new Occidental policy of treating same-gender relations as an optional life style, one "orientation" among others. Many a Western observer fears that the whole-sale public up-grading of homosexuality, including homosexual marriages, is a symptom of decadence, indicative of a declining civilization. Such people are scandalised by the existence of two entirely homosexual city quarters in San Francisco. No wonder that they sympathise with the Muslim attitude: to show compassion with seemingly "born" homosexuals while refusing to treat homosexuality as such as a normal affair in public.

In the Occident the pendulum constantly seems to swing back and forth between a Puritanical demonisation of

sex (and even marriage) and sexual licentiousness, without limits or taboos. Thoughtful Western people are therefore impressed by the more balanced and sober Muslim approach to the sexual nature and needs of man. Islam does not sanctify marriage by raising it to the level of a Christian "sacrament" but, with common sense, treats this union rather as a possibly non-permanent contract. At the same time, however, Islam considers the sexual life between married partners as *'ibadah*, i.e. an act of devotion and compassion.

People who have been able to maintain a sense for what is natural of man — for his *fitrah* (nature)— may well realise that Islam's approach to sexuality makes good sense.

g) Even in the field of economics Islam might be perceived as a saving grace. At first sight, the prohibition of *riba* (interest) is likely to be considered naive and highly impractical. But then people may have second thoughts when realising that this prohibition may help defend the very spirit of entrepreneurship on which capitalism is built. How that? By insisting on profit-and-loss-sharing financial arrangements Islam fights the saturation and stagnation which sets in when capital is mainly used in risk-free modalities.

h) There are quite a few other features of Islam which might attract Western people to this faith, including the health aspects of Ramadhan fasting.

But all these aspects in the end boil down to the most basic difference between Occident and Orient: the quality of life symbolised in different attitudes towards quantity and quality: The Occident obviously cherishes quantitative aspects to a point where nothing is of real value, i.e., money value, that cannot be quantified, i.e. digitalised. In fact, there is a general denial of non-quantifiable values and merely spiritual truths. Seen from this standpoint Western man's life is more oriented towards *h a v i n g* while the Muslim's life is more dedicated to *b e i n g*.

The Orient, including the Islamic world, is certainly sensitive to the pleasures of consumption, transported through globalisation. But in this region qualitative aspects of life are still frequently valued above quantitative ones. Indeed, that quality of life — composure, leisure, contemplation, friendship, hospitality — as a specifically Islamic concern should ring a bell with many Westerners frightened by crass materialism.

This Is Bound To Happen

As we have seen there are a lot of reasons why Islam should, and could, be perceived as antidote against the most Western short-comings. Thus, Islam might become the leading ideology of the 21st century.

But there are also factors working in the opposite direction. The Muslims have not yet realised anywhere a true Muslim economic system. Their positions on the decisive questions of democracy, human rights, and women's rights are still too vague to be convincing. And their educational systems in several respects are still medieval.

In addition, Muslim behaviour is frequently counteracting their *da'wah* efforts. In the West many Muslim immigrants, especially if illiterate, are hardly able to project their faith. They naturally tend to form tightly knit ethnic groups, thereby causing a sort of ghettoisation. By defending the civilization of their home country — its food, dress, music, social mores, and language — they turn Islam into something of folkloristic interest only for their environment.

Worse, many immigrants seem only interested in their countries of origin, to which they want to return at the earliest. A Turk in Germany who wants to re-Islamise Turkey is of course pretty much lost for *da'wah* in his guest country.

Inasmuch as some do try to propagate Islam in the

West, they frequently give it such a rigid, legalistic, even Talmudic appearance that Western people are startled about the absence of spirituality. So much form seems to be valued over substance, and so often marginal issues seem to be treated like central ones.

For all these reasons the mere presence of Muslim guest workers in terms of religion is making too little impact on their Western neighbours.

And there is one more factor that may keep Islam from becoming dominant: The human talent to avoid issues by conveniently looking the other way. A sick man — and the Occident is sick — must not only admit to being sick; he must swallow the prescribed pills rather than leaving them on his night table. Insight is one thing, acting upon it another. As the former German State President Roman Herzog put it: “Our problem is not cognitive but one of application.”

The Qur'an abounds with stories of nations of old who failed to read the signs on the wall, rejecting all warnings until their civilizations collapsed in tragedy. It is well possible that the contemporary Western world, it too, will not have the courage and determination to change direction in mid-course and opt for the Islamic way of life. If so, after having triumphed over Communism only recently, the Occident, too, may go down in an orgy of self-destruction: as a victim of its internal contradictions of which the most destructive one is the deification of man.

This is bound to happen unless the West re-admits the Sacred, Transcendental Reality, Allah that is, and starts all over to live in accordance with the absolute values and divine norms as revealed in the Qur'an and reinforced by the Sunnah of Allah's last prophet.